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# Defra Classification of Local Authority Districts and Unitary Authorities in England

## A Technical Guide

Updated April 2009, following Local Government boundary  
reorganisation

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## **Foreword**

This document updates Defra's recommended method for classifying the level of rurality within Local and Unitary Authorities in England following re-organisation in April 2009 and indicates an approach that can be used at other geographical levels.

# 1 Local Authority Changes

- 1.1 Nine new unitary authorities were created in April 2009 to replace 37 district authorities (and 7 county councils) resulting in a new total of 326 LAs<sup>1</sup> in England (see [Annex 1](#)).
- 1.2 The classification has been updated to take account of the reduction in the number of authorities. At the same time it was decided to make some minor changes to the methodology, as described in section 2, in an attempt to reclassify LAs in more appropriate categories.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we refer to 'LAs' as a shortened form of 'local authorities', although more accurately they are the lowest tier of local authorities that include Shire and Metropolitan districts, unitary authorities and London Boroughs.

## 2 Changes to the methodology

- 2.1 This section outlines the changes that have been made in how the methodology is applied to the classification. Sections 6 and 7 of the original technical guide (July 2005) have been updated to reflect the changes to the methodology. Sections 3 and 4 of this document are the new replacement versions.
- 2.2 The first change to the old process is to identify all of those LAs that are considered 'Significant Rural' immediately after the 'Rural-80' and 'Rural-50' categories have been selected. This change in the order removes the following LAs that were previously classed as 'urban' and now become 'Significant Rural' as they are considered to have significant proportional amounts of population living in rural settlements:

**Table 1: LAs changing from 'urban' to 'Significant Rural' categories**

LA	Old category	% population rural	Urban Population	Rural Population
Mole Valley	Major Urban	48	42,160	38,155
Redcar & Cleveland UA	Large Urban	44	77,506	61,681
Fylde	Large Urban	42	42,500	30,699
Chorley	Large Urban	40	60,313	40,027
Dacorum	Major Urban	36	88,563	49,113
Epping Forest	Major Urban	35	78,075	42,731
Eastleigh	Large Urban	32	79,287	37,084
Wakefield	Major Urban	30	220,748	94,446
Wyre	Large Urban	28	76,201	29,352

- 2.3 The previous definition of 'Significant Rural' included LAs that had "more than 37,000 people... of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns". However, as the Classification is now intended to be used nationally for both rural and urban policy it is more appropriate to consider 'Significant Rural' solely on the proportion of the population of an LA that is divided between rural and urban settlements. Therefore the new definition for 'Significant Rural' reads as follows:

*"LAs with more than 26 percent but less than 50 percent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns"*

- 2.4 This change in the definition of the 'Significant Rural' category results in the following four LAs changing category:

**Table 2: LAs changing from ‘Significant Rural’ to ‘Other Urban’**

LA	% population urban	Urban Population	Rural Population
Doncaster	83	237,987	48,834
Barnsley	80	174,485	43,616
Chelmsford	76	119,622	37,280
Charnwood	74 <sup>2</sup>	113,549	39,731

2.5 The next steps in the methodology are the identification of the three ‘urban’ categories in the same way as described previously in the original technical guide.

2.6 However, to be consistent with the ‘Significant Rural’ category, the definition of ‘Other Urban’ has also been revised by removing the reference to “fewer than 37,000 people”. This results in the new definition reading as follows:

*“LAs with less than 26 percent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns”*

2.7 Table 3 below summarises the change in distribution across the six categories following the reduction in the number of local authorities and the changes to the methodology:

**Table 3: Six way category LA totals**

Category	Numerical classification	Pre April 2009	Disbanded	Created	Urban to SR	SR to OU	Post April 2009
Major Urban	1	76	-1	0	-4		71
Large Urban	2	45	-1	0	-5		39
Other Urban	3	55	-1	0		4	58
Significant Rural	4	53	-5	2	9	-4	55
Rural-50	5	52	-10	6			48
Rural-80	6	73	-19	1			55
<b>Total:</b>		<b>354</b>	<b>-37</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>326</b>

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<sup>2</sup> This authority is not ‘Significant Rural’ as it has a rural population of 25.9%.

### 3 The Process of Classification

3.1 The following information was assembled for each Census Output Area (COA) in England and Wales:

- residential population (from the 2001 Census)
- Local Authority (LA) membership
- morphology type (as assigned in the Rural Definition)
- where appropriate, the identity of the associated urban area (derived from the ONS 'look up' table associated with the 2001 urban areas data set).

3.2 Every COA identified as having Urban morphology in the Rural Definition was then 'flagged' as falling uniquely into one of the following categories according to the characteristics of its associated urban area:

- 'major' urban area<sup>3</sup> (an urban area with more than 750,000 population in 2001),
- 'large' urban area (an urban area with between 250,000 and 750,000 population in 2001),
- 'other' urban area (an urban area with between 10,000 and 250,000 population that is not classed as a 'larger market town'),
- 'larger market town' (an urban area with between 10,000 and 30,000 population in 2001 that also meets service availability criteria for a 'hub' market town<sup>4</sup>).

3.3 The remaining COA were 'flagged' according to their Rural Definition morphology type. The categories applied were as follows:

- rural town and fringe',
- 'village'
- 'dispersed settlement'<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> A list of 'major' and 'large' urban areas is given in Annex 1 of the original Technical Guide. <http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/files/la-class-orig-technical.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See Annex 3 of the original Technical Guide for a fuller explanation of how these settlements were identified.

<sup>5</sup> Note that in the case of the new Rural Definition, COAs are allocated to a settlement type based upon the settlement of residence of the *majority* of people living in that COA.

3.4 Data in these seven categories were then aggregated for all Local Authorities, to produce the information on which the classification is based. A list of these data is given in Annex 2 of the original technical guide<sup>6</sup>. The classification process consisted of five main steps carried out in the following order:

### **Step 1**

The identification of **Rural-80** LAs - those which have at least 80% of their population living in COAs classified as rural<sup>7</sup>.

### **Step 2**

The identification of **Rural-50** LAs - those in which between 50% and 80% of the population lives in rural COAs.

### **Step 3**

LAs in which between 26% and 50% of the population resides in rural COAs were identified and labelled as **Significant Rural**.

### **Step 4**

The identification of those LAs which are entirely within, or which contain a significant amount<sup>8</sup> of population within, one of the 6 **Major Urban** areas or one of the 17 **Large Urban** areas. Note: there were no LAs with population in more than one of these two classes of settlement.

### **Step 5**

The remaining LAs (i.e. those that have less than 26% of their population in rural areas and are not part of a major or large urban area) were labelled as **Other Urban**.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/files/la-class-orig-technical.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of this exercise, the following categories of COA were classified as "rural": larger market town; rural town and fringe; village; dispersed settlement.

<sup>8</sup> See section 4.3 below for the exact criteria used.



## 4 The Criteria of Classification

- 4.1 The numerical criteria for identifying groups within the classification were derived from detailed scrutiny of the statistical distributions of the absolute and proportionate information on populations within COA coded settlement types. Cut-off points were in most cases chosen on the basis of evidence (statistical and visual) of a 'natural break' in the rank ordered histogram of the relevant distribution.
- 4.2 For example, prior to April 2009, there were 95 LAs with at least some resident population within a major urban area and 3 statistical / visual 'break points' in the distribution of their populations - at 338,000, 181,000 and 101,000. Given the shape of the overall distribution the 101,000 'break point' was chosen and this was rounded for simplicity and memorability to 100,000. Similar procedures were applied to derive the 'break points' in other distributions. Further details are given in Annex 4 of the original technical guide<sup>9</sup>.
- 4.3 The criteria (with associated nomenclature), for identifying groups of LAs were derived from this procedure as follows:

### **Rural 80 LAs**

Local Authorities that have at least 80 percent of their population resident in rural settlements (including those urban areas with between 10,000 and 30,000 population regarded for this exercise as 'larger market towns'). There are 55 LAs in this group.

### **Rural 50 LAs**

Local Authorities with at least 50 percent but less than 80 percent of their population in rural settlements (including those urban areas with between 10,000 and 30,000 population regarded for this exercise as 'larger market towns'). There are 48 LAs in this group.

### **Significant Rural LAs**

Local Authorities with more than 26 percent but less than 50 percent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns. There are 55 LAs in this group.

### **Major Urban LAs**

Local Authorities with *either* a minimum of 100,000 people *or* a minimum of 50 percent of their total population resident within a major urban area (i.e., an urban area with at least 750,000 population). There are 71 LAs in this group.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/files/la-class-orig-technical.pdf>

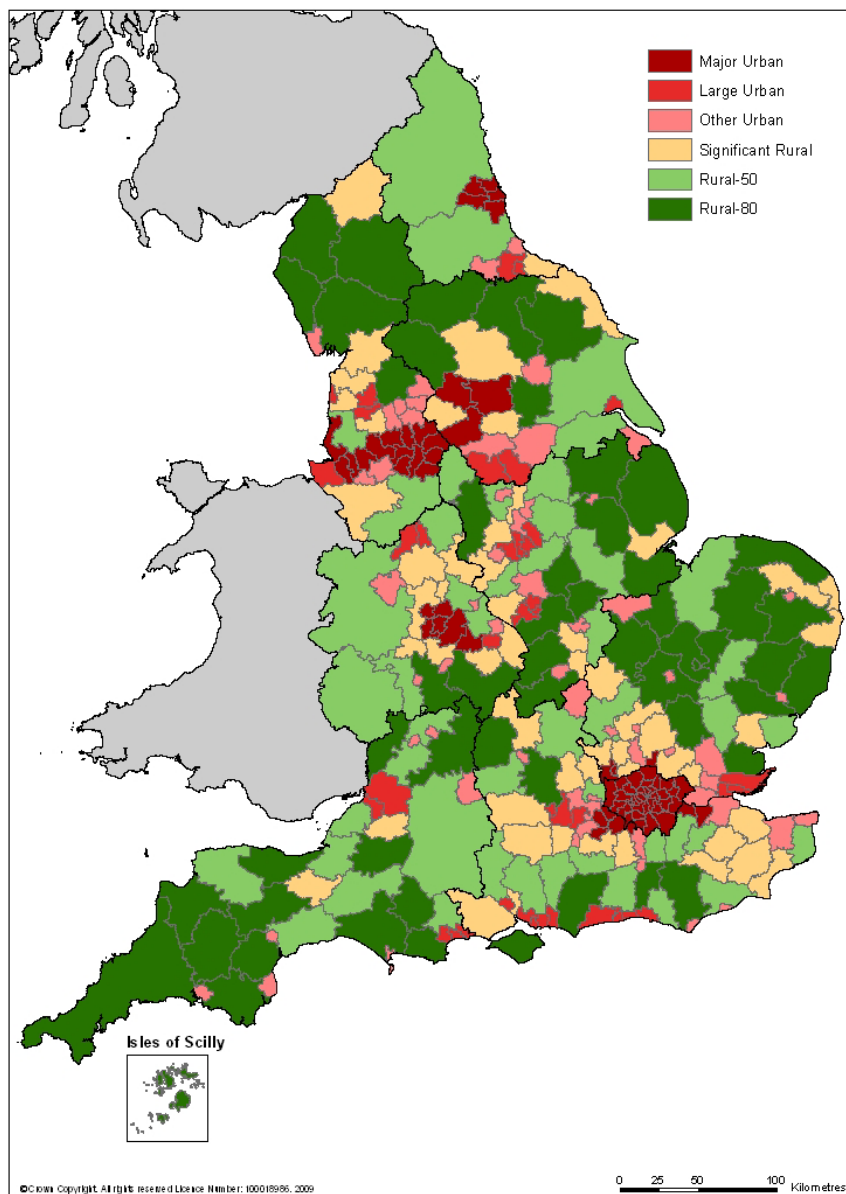
## Large Urban LAs

Local Authorities with *either* a minimum of 50,000 people or a minimum of 50 percent of their total population resident within a large urban area (i.e., an urban area with between 250,000 and 750,000 population). There are 39 LAs in this group.

## Other Urban LAs

Local Authorities that have less than 26 percent of their population living in rural settlements (including larger market towns) and do not have a substantial quantity or proportion of their population living within major or large urban areas. There are 58 LAs in this group.

**Figure 1: The new geography of the classification**



## 5 Data at higher level geographies

5.1 The exact criteria from the LA classification can not be applied to groups with higher level geographies. This is because they generally have higher populations and, by using the methodology devised, it would result in most of these geographies being allocated to either Large Urban or Rural-50. However, by using similar criteria to the classification, it is reasonable for the higher level geographies to be assigned to the following three categories in the order stated:

<b>Classification</b>	<b>% Urban</b>	<b>% Rural</b>
Predominantly Urban	$\geq 74\%$	$< 26\%$
Predominantly Rural	$< 50\%$	$\geq 50\%$
Significant Rural	$< 74\%$	$\geq 26\%$

5.2 Data relating to the above three categories are available for the following higher level geography groups:

- Counties
- Fire Authorities
- National Parks
- Passenger Transport Authorities
- Police Authorities
- Waste Disposal Authorities

5.3 Where there is a mix of data available (i.e. LAs and counties), the lower level geography will firstly need to be combined to produce the three way classification of 'Predominantly Rural' (R50 and R80), 'Significant Rural' (SR) and 'Predominantly Urban' (OU, MU and LU) before then adding the data for the higher level geography.

## 6 Time series

6.1 As a result of new unitaries being created and changes to the methodology, it will not be possible to create continuous time series for existing datasets. It is therefore advised that breaks in time series are noted in publications. Alternatively, new time series could be created going back over time using the new coverage of LAs so that they each take on the classification of the new unitary authority (e.g. each old district in Cornwall now becomes Rural 80). See [Annex 2](#).

## Annex 1: LA Changes April 2009

Name	Region	Classification	Numerical classification
<b>Created:</b>			
Bedford	East of England	SR	4
Central Bedfordshire	East of England	R50	5
Cheshire East	North West	R50	5
Cheshire West	North West	SR	4
Cornwall	South West	R80	6
Durham	North East	R50	5
Northumberland	North East	R50	5
Shropshire	West Midlands	R50	5
Wiltshire	South West	R50	5
<b>Disbanded:</b>			
Alnwick	North East	R80	6
Bedford	East of England	SR	4
Berwick-upon-Tweed	North East	R80	6
Blyth Valley	North East	R50	5
Bridgnorth	West Midlands	R80	6
Caradon	South West	R80	6
Carrick	South West	R80	6
Castle Morpeth	North East	R80	6
Chester	North West	SR	4
Chester-le-Street	North East	MU	1
Congleton	North West	R80	6
Crewe & Nantwich	North West	SR	4
Derwentside	North East	R80	6
Durham City	North East	R50	5
Easington	North East	R50	5
Ellesmere Port & Neston	North West	LU	2
Kennet	South West	R80	6
Kerrier	South West	R50	5
Macclesfield	North West	SR	4
Mid Bedfordshire	East of England	R80	6
North Cornwall	South West	R80	6
North Shropshire	West Midlands	R80	6
North Wiltshire	South West	R50	5
Oswestry	West Midlands	R80	6
Penwith	South West	R80	6
Restormel	South West	R80	6
Salisbury	South West	R50	5
Sedgefield	North East	R50	5
Shrewsbury & Atcham	West Midlands	SR	4
South Bedfordshire	East of England	OU	3
South Shropshire	West Midlands	R80	6
Teesdale	North East	R80	6
Tynedale	North East	R80	6
Vale Royal	North West	R50	5
Wansbeck	North East	R50	5
Wear Valley	North East	R80	6
West Wiltshire	South West	R50	5

## Annex 2: Old LAs to new classifications

New Unitary	Old LA	Classification	Numerical classification
Bedford	Bedford	SR	4
Central Bedfordshire	Mid Bedfordshire	R50	5
Central Bedfordshire	South Bedfordshire	R50	5
Cheshire East	Congleton	R50	5
Cheshire East	Crewe & Nantwich	R50	5
Cheshire East	Macclesfield	R50	5
Cheshire West	Chester	SR	4
Cheshire West	Ellesmere Port & Neston	SR	4
Cheshire West	Vale Royal	SR	4
Cornwall	Caradon	R80	6
Cornwall	Carrick	R80	6
Cornwall	Kerrier	R80	6
Cornwall	North Cornwall	R80	6
Cornwall	Penwith	R80	6
Cornwall	Restormel	R80	6
Durham	Chester-le-Street	R50	5
Durham	Derwentside	R50	5
Durham	Durham City	R50	5
Durham	Easington	R50	5
Durham	Sedgefield	R50	5
Durham	Teesdale	R50	5
Durham	Wear Valley	R50	5
Northumberland	Alnwick	R50	5
Northumberland	Berwick-upon-Tweed	R50	5
Northumberland	Blyth Valley	R50	5
Northumberland	Castle Morpeth	R50	5
Northumberland	Tynedale	R50	5
Northumberland	Wansbeck	R50	5
Shropshire	Bridgnorth	R50	5
Shropshire	North Shropshire	R50	5
Shropshire	Oswestry	R50	5
Shropshire	Shrewsbury & Atcham	R50	5
Shropshire	South Shropshire	R50	5
Wiltshire	Kennet	R50	5
Wiltshire	North Wiltshire	R50	5
Wiltshire	Salisbury	R50	5
Wiltshire	West Wiltshire	R50	5